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SUBJECT: COMBATING EXTREMISM IN FRANCE

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CLASSIFIED BY DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION KARL HOFMANN, REASONS
1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (C) Summary: The U.S. and France enjoy a strong and healthy relationship in matters related to combating violent extremism, especially as regards the investigative side. Intelligence, law enforcement and judicial exchanges and cooperation are ongoing and effective, and the French government's capabilities in combating extremism are broad, deep and tested. Increasingly, the GOF is also expanding its efforts to reach out to Muslim communities in particular, through the launch of the French Council for the Muslim Faith, the appointment of Muslim national chaplains for prisons, and the creation of a Foundation for French Islam to organize private financing and construction of mosques. Our government-to-government efforts in the investigative domain are enhanced by USG programs aimed at complementing the GOF's own outreach efforts by reaching out ourselves to marginalized or "at risk" populations in France. While we have been able to engage a number of moderate Muslim leaders and NGOs around France, our continued success in this area requires a sustained effort, which, in turn, will require appropriate personnel and financial resources. End summary.

FRANCE AND EXTREMISM

2. (C) Within France's overall Muslim population of five to six million, the RG (France's police intelligence service) estimates that roughly 9,000 could be considered extremist, or, just over one-tenth of one percent. The RG has also estimated that of the roughly 1,600 mosques and prayer halls in France, fewer than 40 could be considered extremist. The vast majority of French Muslims are believed to be non-practicing, with GoF officials estimating that only 10 percent of those characterized as Muslim are practicing. The minority of French Muslims who regularly attend mosque are more likely than not to encounter foreign imams. According to the French Ministry of Interior, there are approximately 1,200 imams in France, of whom 75 percent are not French citizens and one-third does not speak French. Among those Muslims considered practicing, there is a small but distinct current of fundamentalist thought, which includes strongly conservative views on the role of women. (For an in-depth examination of Islamic extremism in France, please see REF C.)

3. (C) Many Muslim immigrants to France have not been well integrated. They are often concentrated in neighborhoods outside France's main cities, where they may suffer from a lack of educational opportunities, racism, and discrimination. (Note. A recent INR poll indicates two-thirds of French Muslims report being victims of racism. End note.) As a result, subsequent generations are often less, rather than more, integrated into French society. They feel -- and often are seen by fellow French -- as not belonging, breeding resentment and a lack of cultural identity that causes a small minority to fall prey to radical imams who frequent the tougher neighborhoods. The INR poll notes 30 percent of French Muslims believe in integrating fully, while another 68 percent wish to integrate but also preserve a separate Muslim identity. The same INR poll shows 95 percent favorable views of France among Muslim respondents, compared to a 78 percent unfavorable rating for the United States. Despite the problems faced by many Muslim youth, some have achieved success; two of the most prominent are former captain of the French national rugby team Abdel Benazzi and football star Zinedine Zidane. Salman Rushdie has said that Zidane "has done more to improve France's attitude towards its Muslim minority than a thousand political speeches."

4. (C) In 2003, the GoF launched the French Council for the Muslim Faith (CFCM) to serve as an official interlocutor on Islamic religious issues, such as building mosques, and to help foster a more moderate, "French Islam." The GoF has leaned on the CFCM to ensure a prominent place for moderates, with Paris Grand Mosque rector Dalil Boubakeur -- an outspoken moderate with considerable GoF and Algerian government support but questionable popular appeal --

serving as CFCM president since its inception. The two main rivals to the Paris Mosque in the CFCM are the conservative National Federation of French Muslims (FNMF), linked to the Moroccan monarchy, and the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF), which has suspected ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Keeping the FNMF and UOIF within the CFCM helps keep fundamentalists within the fold and in dialogue with the GoF. Though rivalries among component groups has hampered the CFCM's effectiveness and the CFCM cannot be considered representative of the all French Muslims, the organization has served as a positive tool to counter extremism. For instance, in fall 2004, CFCM leaders rallied to support the GoF when the Islamic Army in Iraq threatened to kill two French hostages if the GoF did not repeal its ban on religious symbols in public schools.

15. (SBU) The French government has long sought an appropriate interlocutor to help combat the rise in militant Islam in French prisons, where some 50 percent of inmates are believed to be Muslim but only 66 of 900 prison chaplains are Muslim. In September 2005, the CFCM named a Moroccan-born high-school math teacher, Moulay El Hassan El Alaoui Talibi, as the first national chaplain for prisons. Talibi, a reputed moderate, has pledged to teach French Muslim inmates about the Koran and address issues such as the lack of halal meat for prisoners.

16. (C) On June 21, the Conseil d'Etat, France's highest court for administrative matters, approved the creation of the Foundation for French Islam, to oversee private financing and construction of mosques, as well as training of imams in French language and civics. The training initiative has been hampered by objections by French universities, which view the project as contrary to French laws on secularism. It is also unclear whether the Foundation will be able to overcome the same internal divisions that have plagued the CFCM, given that both organizations have similar component groups.

17. (SBU) On March 15, 2004, the French Parliament passed a law banning the wearing of "conspicuous" religious symbols in public schools, citing the need to preserve the French interpretation of the separation of church and state, while at the same time combating increasing Muslim fundamentalism in the classroom. Some religious groups, human rights organizations, and foreign governments criticized the law; however, French authorities argued that many young Muslim girls were being forced to wear headscarves by male family members. In the first year of its implementation, 44 Muslim girls and three Sikh boys were expelled for violating the law; all reportedly enrolled in private schools, distance learning courses, or schools abroad. A report issued by the Ministry of Education at the beginning of the 2005 academic year declared the implementation of the law a success.

18. (SBU) Another GoF initiative to combat extremism and foster integration has been the creation of "Priority Education Zones" (ZEPs). Because the law does not permit the singling out of individuals based on their religion, race or ethnic background, it can be difficult for the government to implement programs that target minorities. However, since many minorities live in low-income areas, the GoF has focused on low-income criteria as a back-door method to assist minorities. Private institutions have also used this concept to diversify. The most notable example (and pioneer in this area) is "Sciences-Po", a prestigious political science university in Paris, which has put together a program to bring in promising students from ZEP high schools in the Paris suburbs.

THE ROLE OF NGOS

19. (SBU) A number of French NGOs work in under-privileged areas on issues such as education, women's rights, equal access to services, discrimination, health, employment, etc. They provide an additional safety net and act as a resource for many of the immigrants and first and second-generation minorities seeking counsel, assistance, or equal treatment but unable or unwilling to access government services when they exist. One such NGO, "SOS Racisme", is behind one of the most successful programs to provide a channel for higher education to minorities.

10. (SBU) While they rely on the work of volunteers, these NGOs most often receive financing from the government in order to implement their programs. For many of these NGOs, financing is made available not through formal application procedures, but through the "patronage" of a particular political group or government official with access to a budget (though an organization must be declared "in the public interest" to be permitted to receive government funds.) When budgets are tight, or when political interest shifts, the crucial financing can disappear. Unfortunately, the past several years have been extremely difficult for

these NGOs - tighter government budgets, decentralization of the government and loss of interest have had a severely negative effect on NGOs, and many have disappeared.

THE MISSION'S RESPONSE

11. (C) After 9/11/01, Mission France immediately engaged the GoF to strengthen its partnership in combating terrorism. All sections and agencies analyzed the extent to which they could contribute towards that goal, and set in motion a coordinated Mission plan to ensure intelligence, law enforcement, reporting, consular and public diplomacy efforts were focused and productive. Post has reported on the success of these programs and the strong partnership with the French government via cable and through successive MPP exercises. In the wake of our intervention in Iraq and the backlash of negative opinion that ensued, a new dimension to the problem facing us was made apparent, and a new strategy for engaging Muslim and Arab minorities in France was set into motion.

12. (C) Public Diplomacy programs were also adjusted to focus on the problem while at the same time deal with France specific sensibilities about minorities. We thus expanded regular programs to reach out to those neighborhoods and institutions where there are large immigrant populations as well as second or third generation French citizens from North and West African extractions, whether or not they practice the Muslim faith. We have recently created and assigned a "Civil Society/Diversity Outreach" portfolio to one of our Cultural Section FSNs with excellent knowledge of these issues in France. We have found that focusing on issues such as discrimination, equal access to justice, housing, health services, women's rights, violence in schools, etc., we have a better avenue for approaching our target audience and winning their trust.

13. (C) The Embassy's PD and Political sections have formed a working group to discuss and analyze specific issues and work closely to broaden embassy outreach to the French Muslim community, particularly the vast majority of moderate or non-practicing Muslim who reject extremism and who can influence others to do the same. This outreach effort includes visits to the "banlieus" (suburbs containing low-income, minority neighborhoods) to establish contacts with local officials, schools and associations, and contact with NGOs dealing with civil society issues that will tend to principally affect at risk communities. Discussions with them continue to help us formulate and adapt our outreach strategy. We are also deepening our longstanding relationship with the Paris Mosque Rector/CFCM President Boubakeur, who is an outspoken opponent of extremism and advocates and Islam in line with modernity and French secular values. In a recent meeting with the Ambassador, Boubakeur stressed the need for Muslims to take back their religion from extremists and reject fundamentalism and terrorism at every turn. We have also sought to increase dialogue with the more conservative elements within the CFCM, including the FNMF and the UOIF, to dispel misperceptions about US policy and stress the need to reject terrorism and extremism.

14. (C) We are also seeking to broaden outreach to individuals and NGOs focused on French Muslim women's issues, including the well-known organization "Ni Putes Ni Soumises" [NPNS - literally, "Neither Whores nor Submissives"], which has campaigned against forced marriages and violence against women in the banlieus, while offering strong support for GoF efforts to ban the wearing of veils in public schools. In recent meetings with emboffs, NPNS officials described the organization as increasingly focused on countering the rise of extremism in French suburbs, stating, "If we don't speak up against fundamentalists, who will?" We have already nominated one of their vice-presidents for an IVL program and hope to continue working with the NGO and its membership.

15. (SBU) These efforts are mirrored and complemented by those of our APPs and CGs in the regions. In cities such as Marseille, Lyon and Lille, which have large Muslim populations, successive USG officials have built strong relationships and broad contact bases within religious and minority communities. In addition, they participate fully in the PD programs listed below.

16. (C) Below follows a listing of PD programs designed to address extremism:

a) International Visitor Leadership Program/Voluntary Visitor Program - Since 2002 we have developed a number of single country projects to bring to the United States French-Muslim leaders along with Jewish, Christian and representatives from other religions to explore ethnic diversity issues in our country. At least one project each

year has been undertaken since then, and we expect to continue the program in future nomination cycles. These projects do not necessarily fall within religious lines, but focus instead on social issues of interest to the participants: education for immigrants and minorities, equal employment opportunities, equal access to services, minorities in the media, etc. Post has also organized a special IV program that provided French Muslim media an opportunity to learn first-hand about US religious and ethnic diversity, US foreign policy, and the depth and richness of US society and culture.

Our Voluntary Visitor program, which has greater flexibility (shorter stays in the U.S., on-going application cycle), is not as useful in this context because many of our contacts in this area do not have the financial means to pay for their international voyage.

Success Rate: Excellent. The success rate of these IV programs in terms of the individuals traveling is unquestionable. Upon their return to France most of these individuals not only have a more positive perception of the U.S. as a whole, but also of the degree of integration, religious freedom, and opportunities available to minorities.

b) Speaker Programs - The Embassy continues to program U.S. experts/speakers for presentations and/or panel discussions about diversity and U.S. values. These speakers have recently included American Muslims who can provide a window on what it is like to be a Muslim living in the United States, and can emphasize that the USG objectives and goals are targeted against terrorism and not Islam or Muslims.

Success rate: Excellent.

c) Education - Post continues to increase its collaboration with the French Ministry of Education to work on projects that would provide greater outreach to minority youth and teachers in France, particularly in "at risk" areas. Some past programs have included debates between young American and French students, presentations to High Schools with significant minority students by Mission staff throughout France, donation of book collections to Universities, schools and libraries with access to minority audiences. PA is also reaching out to minority leaders to discuss special programs in education for schools with significant numbers of minority/disadvantaged students. These programs will focus on learning more about U.S. values and culture to provide a better understanding of our society and of our policies.

We have received approval from ECA Washington to fund a new program for student teacher exchanges between the U.S. and France. This program was created to focus in particular on teachers from disadvantaged communities (ZEPs), which will lead to a major multiplier effect as the program develops. We hope to obtain matching funds from the French government.

Working with the Fulbright Commission and the French MinEd, we have increased funding for summer institutes. Of particular interest are those institutes directed at secondary school teachers, whose influences on students make them ideal partners in the fight against negative stereotypes about the U.S. We are exploring ways to promote greater participation by minorities in these institutes, including the possibility of a special France-only program. Fulbright commissions in Europe have been tasked by Washington to create new programs to reach out to minorities. While the projects presented by Fulbright France have not been approved for funding, we will continue to work with them on outreach.

Success Rate: Excellent.

d) Publications - We have distributed to our contacts throughout France, copies of the Arabic language magazine "HI", with points of distribution including North African and Middle Eastern diplomatic missions; soup kitchen with street library; France's first private high school for Muslims; NGOs dealing with integration, and others.

With end-of-year funds we have also purchased collections of American classics and have distributed them to institutions likely to appeal to minority youth.

Success Rate: Moderate. While publications are an excellent method to show life in the U.S. and have long-term value in terms of the original investment, there are a number of issues that pose problems for us. Some efforts to distribute HI magazine are met with reluctance by our interlocutors (e.g. Arab consulates), who view their distribution as "propaganda". Furthermore, there is a language barrier issue (see below under "what we need to change.")

e) Arts and Entertainment - Post has showcased minority talents as part of its efforts to highlight the diversity of our culture and dispel negative stereotypes about our society and our attitudes about race, religion, and the Muslim world. We have provided support to organizers of programs and concerts that bring US musicians for workshops and master classes in heavily minority communities outside of Paris. This year we supported the "Blues-sur-Seine" 18-day festival that reaches underprivileged communities in numerous towns just outside of Paris. The American artists deliver messages of hope and tolerance and encourage disillusioned youth to overcome their hardships.

This year we also provided support for an Afro-Caribbean Festival in the under-privileged and heavily minority 19th arrondissement of Paris (where some arrests have been made of youth suspected of traveling to Arab countries for terrorist training.) Programming covered conferences on topics such as solidarity, health, history and remembrance for a community of socio-economically disadvantaged Muslim and Arab youth who need alternative avenues of interest away from religious extremism, crime and violence. Our support extends to the young and multi-ethnic organizers of this event, one of which has been selected to participate in FY06 IVLP.

Success Rate: Excellent. For individual programs supported by the Embassy, we have received very positive feedback about how these presentations convey a different (and more positive) image of the United States. Our simple interaction with the organizers and the young people involved in these events gives them first-hand appreciation of our role and our willingness to have an open dialogue.

Other - The Ambassador hosts an annual Iftar Dinner providing the Embassy with a focus for outreach with important contacts in the Arab/Muslim community in Paris. This year, we are expanding the guest list to include non-elite guests. Other mission officials, including Principal Officers and CGs participate in this and other celebratory events during the holy month of Ramadan. Arab-audience radio message with words of encouragement at the beginning of Ramadan holy season are also part of our outreach.

What Needs to Change

17. (C) All of the above programs are excellent tools for outreach," but individuals who are not Muslim themselves but who work to integrate these communities are not considered qualified for the incentive slots.

-- We need to mix audiences. The possibility of mixing audiences for an event gives legitimacy to the message we seek to convey. This is as true for a "religious tolerance" IV program, as it is for a "Jazz Ambassadors" concert.

-- We need speakers who can speak French. The majority of young Muslims in France do not speak Arabic, and they do not speak English. Programs that use interpretations are extremely expensive in France and post simply does not have the budget. In addition, the type of program that appeals to our target audience is much more interactive and not enhanced by interpretation.

-- We need a cadre of young American minority entertainers who would travel to posts with their own budgets (bringing artists from the US is prohibitive, as is in-country travel.) Most French youth are avid fans of US hip-hop, rap and similar art. We realize that a great deal of caution must be used in engaging these artists (who can themselves convey violent messages), but sending religious groups because they are Muslim will simply not work with French youth.

-- We need French-language material. The magazine put out by the Department for youth ("Hi") cannot be distributed where it could be used because it cannot be understood by the audience we are seeking to reach. At least some of the classics found in the collections that we present to libraries and universities could find their way into the hands of students and older at risk groups if they were published in French and made available at low cost to posts.

-- We need to re-think the concept of "Western Europe" when it comes to PD programs. While these are wealthy countries, with solid infrastructures, poverty and disenfranchisement exist among minorities. Training for NGOs on grants applications, English language programs, book donations, and other 'traditional' PD programs can and should be utilized as long as they are adapted to the European context. These programs can provide individuals the tools they need to improve their own lives and thus resist the call of extremism.

-- We need to know when to "advertise". It is not always productive for us to advertise our participation or sponsorship of a program. This can be counterproductive and a better strategy can be to build a solid relationship with our interlocutor, win their trust, and reverse stereotypes by conveying an image that is self-effacing rather than boastful.

-- We need additional internal resources - they are crucial. We currently do not have the personnel necessary to conduct a sustained program of Muslim outreach. We have, for the last two years, requested an additional Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer who would coordinate these efforts. A country strategy needs a country strategist who is dedicated to that issue with at least one FSN staff to provide the support for programs.

-- We need additional external resources. There are a number of excellent programs that we can and should support but which we are simply unable to (in education, arts and entertainment, social issues, IV follow-up, etc.). As we continue to reach out to new interlocutors, they will seek our support of time and money. Our inability to come through after we have reached out to them will bring disappointment and could easily turn them away. outreach," but individuals who are not Muslim themselves but who work to integrate these communities are not considered qualified for the incentive slots.

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